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Review of school-community relationsuip studies in Cincinnati, Columbus, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., shows that these successful undertakings were guided by several objectives. Most important among these were (1) to develop information about means of local school-community interaction and communication and their effectiveness, (2) to become knowledgeable about local school-community issues, and (3) to cultivate public receptivity to survey recommendations. A variety of methods--including sample surveys, case study techniques, content analysis of school board minutes and other documents, interviews with local notables, and community meetings--were employed. The reports demonstrate the value of collecting data from several sources and by several means in surveys of this type. A second characteristic of the various study designs which merits duplication in other surveys is effort to examine the capacity of school personnel to hear and respond to public interests as well as to tell the public about programs. The study processes reflect an action oriented posture on the part of the researchers which could be adapted usefully to other settings. (TT)

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THE STUDY OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS IN URBAN SETTINGS: A DISCUSSION OF THE METHODS EMPLOYED IN THE CINCINNATI, COLUMBUS, DETROIT, AND WASHINGTON, D.C. SCHOOL SURVEYS*

by
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The rationale for school-community cooperation is basic to the public ideology and has been elaborated well elsewhere.[1] Briefly stated, parents and other citizens depend upon the schools to provide educational experiences for young people which are consistent with societal expectations. School people, in turn, rely upon citizens to provide attitudinal and financial support for their efforts and to supplement the education of individual students. Mutually supportive relationships flourish when school people and citizens understand and respond to their respective interests, expectations, and capabilities. Such understanding, the theory continues, is developed through effective home-school communications.

Each of the reports under consideration today[2] contains at least one chapter which proceeds from this rationale and examines the relationship which exists between the school system and the public. The analyses and related recommendations in these reports deal with (1) the level of understanding and patterns of communications which exist among schools and their clients and (2) the nature and extent of lay participation in the development and pursuit of educational objectives at both school building and school system levels.

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Objectives in Studying School-Community Relationships

Within this framework, the general purposes of school surveys suggest a number of objectives to be achieved in studying school-community relationships. A first objective is to ascertain the effectiveness of existing procedures. Criteria of effectiveness include the extent to which school people and citizens are knowledgeable about each other's interests and programs and the extent to which each party holds positive attitudes toward the other. A related objective is to develop understanding of the actual processes which characterize local relationships. Inquiry related to this objective is directed to the ways in which school people, parents, other citizens, and representatives of other social and educative agencies learn about and communicate with each other. Variations in effectiveness and processes can be associated with socio-economic and demographic characteristics to compare relationships between the schools and various publics.

Realization of the objectives stated thusfar will produce information about the processes and consequences of school-community relationships. From the perspective of developing generalizable knowledge, these are probably the most useful outcomes. However, in addition to whatever commitment school survey teams may have to producing such knowledge, they also have a contractual obligation to help solve local problems. This responsibility mandates two additional objectives.

Researchers who conduct school surveys must develop awareness about local issues on which citizens and school people do not understand or cooperate with one another and/or school-related issues on which citizens themselves are in disagreement. The commitment to offer

recommendations for coping with local problems carries with it the responsibility for being knowledgeable about these problems. To overlook local issues is to ignore the context within which local problems must be resolved. One consequence is to increase the likelihood that survey recommendations will not be implemented because they are unacceptable to school authorities and the general public. This position could be distorted to sound like advocacy of telling people what they want to hear but that is not the point to be made. The real point is that recommendations should be sufficiently tailored to local conditions that they can be implemented and thus stand some chance of ameliorating local problems.

The second objective in studying school-community relationships which is peculiar to school surveys is developmental in nature. Just as survey recommendations should be suited to the context in which they are to be implemented, the study process should contribute to altering that context in anticipation of the recommendations. School surveys frequently are conducted in a climate of public controversy regarding school affairs. Unless the study process can change that climate in such a way that negative feelings are reduced and public willingness and capacity to strengthen the school system are encouraged, it is not likely that the survey findings will have much impact upon local practice. Here it must be cautioned that the objective is not to coopt all opposition to school officials. Instead, the study process should enhance general public interest in school affairs. Parties to local conflict can be helped to see that there is a role for citizen "watchdog groups"[3] and that the concerns of such bodies can be aired and acted upon to bring about useful changes in school programs.

Although the four reports reflect differences in emphasis upon the foregoing objectives, it appears that each survey team recognized all of these objectives and employed a variety of techniques to achieve them.

Techniques in Studying School-Community Relationships

The most common technique used to determine the effectiveness of school-community relationships was the survey. Sample surveys of citizens were done for this purpose in Cincinnati, Columbus, and Washington. In Cincinnati, a sample of 1348 households was drawn at random from the billing list of the local gas and electric company and, in a few areas, from city directories. Interviews were conducted by PTA leaders who were provided a brief training session. The Columbus sample of nearly 1500 households was selected by random cluster techniques from the city directory.[4] Interviews were conducted by college students, volunteers from the League of Women Voters, and several black housewifes recruited through the Urban League. As in Cincinnati, the Columbus interviewers attended a training session. The Washington, D.C., survey differed from the foregoing in some respects. Random cluster techniques were used to select a sample of 400 parents rather than households, and professional interviewers conducted the survey.[5] In each of the surveys respondents were asked questions about their opinions regarding the schools and school issues as well as some questions which indicated their familiarity with school affairs.

Teachers and administrators were surveyed (either the total population or a random sample depending upon the locale) for various purposes in each of the studies. Among the questions asked of them were

some dealing with their perceptions of the community in which they work. The responses were useful indicators of the willingness of school people to cooperate with citizens (e.g. Almost 40 per cent of the teacher respondents in one city disagreed that "parents should have a right to try to persuade teachers to change practices which they consider detrimental."). Still another survey was conducted in Columbus to determine the perceptions and working relationships which employers and representatives of social agencies have regarding the schools.

Data about the process of school-community relationships was obtained through several methods. Principals and central office administrators with responsibility in this area were interviewed about local techniques for communicating and planning with the public. Board of education members were asked similar questions. In the Washington survey, board of education minutes and correspondence to the board of education over a one year period were analyzed. These data provided evidence about the kinds of issues which come before the board and the way in which the board monitors and responds to such matters.

The surveys referred to above also provided information about processes. For example, all of them asked questions about the nature and frequency of parent visits to school, other face-to-face contact with school personnel, and participation in parent-teacher organizations. The Cincinnati and Columbus household surveys also included questions about the most frequent sources of school-related information for respondents. Non-parents as well as parents indicated that reports from school children were their best source of information. The mass media and information sent home from school also received frequent mention.

The prominence of the public media in conveying information about the schools prompted the study teams in Cincinnati, Columbus, and Washington to give special attention to them. Reporters and editors were interviewed to determine (1) types of school events they consider newsworthy, (2) ways in which they work with school officials, and (3) perceptions of school willingness to cooperate with them. In Columbus and Washington a content analysis of newspaper articles and editorials was done to determine the point of view taken toward school affairs.

It could be argued that many of the techniques described thusfar for gathering data about effectiveness and processes focus upon city wide matters to the neglect of relationships among residents and school people in a particular neighborhood. For this reason, the city wide survey data in Cincinnati and Columbus were supplemented by case data which focused upon relationships in neighborhood settings. In each city, four junior high school communities which vary in socio-economic, racial composition, and general reputation for school-community cooperation were selected for study. The principal, assistant principal, guidance counselor and several teachers in each of these schools were interviewed about local attitudes, communications patterns, and procedures for home-school contact and cooperation. In addition reputational techniques[6] were used to identify thirteen to twenty three residents and organizational or agency representatives in each of the neighborhoods who were knowledgeable about neighborhood school affairs. These persons were asked questions similar to those asked the local administrators and teachers. The case studies revealed that school-community attitudes and practices varied considerably among the neighborhoods in the respective cities. Similar information was developed

in Detroit where neighborhood study groups prepared reports about each of the local high schools.

Achievement of the third objective, developing sensitivity to local issues, came as a by-product of the activities described above. Review of local newspaper clippings and interviews with board of education members, administrators, teachers, and citizens identified through the neighborhood case studies provided much of this information. Additional perspective in this area was gained through other activities which encouraged public receptivity for survey findings and support for action on them.

Several data gathering activities in each of the cities demonstrated potential to enhance citizen interest in and support for the schools. For example, the neighborhood surveys in Cincinnati, Columbus, and Washington stimulated citizen awareness to the fact that a study was in progress which was pointed toward helping the local schools. Other steps were taken to this end as well. Members of the study teams in each of the cities devoted considerable time to discussing local school affairs with community leaders and citizen groups. For example, the Washington team interviewed more than two dozen community leaders[7] and held a series of meetings with hundreds of parents and interested citizens. Similarly, the University Advisory Commission in Columbus invited any community group or organization which desired to meet with members of the commission. Many such meetings were held. In addition, newspaper announcements and flyers to all Columbus school parents invited citizens to attend one or more of thirteen community conferences held in local high schools. Approximately 3600 people attended these meetings

to express their feelings about the schools, and an additional 400 responded to an invitation to write the Commission about their concerns.

The most important feature which distinguishes the Detroit study from the other three is that it was done primarily by lay citizens. The Detroit High School Study Commission was comprised of local notables charged with establishing guidelines for the gathering of data by local teams, reviewing the team reports, and presenting interpretations and recommendations to the board of education. Twenty-two local teams, one for each high school, were appointed by the board of education to study the respective schools. The commission and study teams were provided staff assistance but, by and large, charted their own courses. Each of the teams included housewives, businessmen, blacks, and some persons who lived in another neighborhood. The various study teams visited schools, interviewed students and parents, and frequently held meetings with neighborhood citizens.

One result of the Detroit study process was that strong public expectations for change and improvement in the high schools developed. This feeling was reflected in the final section of the survey report which urged the creation of Citizens' School Councils. This section noted that previous reports about the schools by local citizen committees had not been implemented adequately, that the commission did not consider its charge completed until follow-up mechanisms had been established, and that citizens' school councils (one for each high school area) should be created to work for the consideration and enactment of the commission recommendations. Creation of a city wide group to work for similar goals also was recommended in Columbus.

Findings of the Four Studies

Little has been said to this point about the findings reported in these studies. Although the purpose of this paper is not to provide an extensive review of these data, I would like to generalize briefly about the findings from the neighborhood sample surveys in Cincinnati, Columbus, and Washington.

One general finding was that citizens are not well-informed about school affairs. For example, nine items in the Cincinnati survey were designed to assess citizen knowledge.[8] These questions dealt with teacher salary levels, school expenditure levels, the composition of the board of education and the name of the superintendent. None of the respondents answered all nine questions correctly while 11 per cent of them all nine incorrectly. Persons in Columbus were no better informed. For example, 52 per cent of them could not identify the superintendent of schools, and 86 per cent were unable to name a single board of education member. Similarly, Washington, D.C., parents were asked a series of questions dealing with their opinions about the track system. Although the survey was conducted at a time when tracking was the most controversial issue in the school system and was receiving much publicity,[9] only one-third of the sample indicated that they were "familiar with the track system."

Juxtaposed with the lack of public knowledge about the schools is a generally favorable public attitude toward them. For example, when asked a general question about "the job which the public schools are doing" only 12 per cent of Cincinnatians and 8 per cent of Columbusites said "below average" or "poor." When asked more specific questions about school programs, 11 per cent of the Cincinnati sample and 30 per cent

of Columbus respondents expressed dissatisfaction with local efforts to prepare students for college. In response to a similar question about preparing students for employment, 33 per cent of Cincinnatians and 37 per cent of Columbusites responded negatively. In Washington, 32 per cent of the parent respondents said local vocational education is "only fair" or "poor," and 42 per cent responded that programs for gifted children (the item most comparable to the Cincinnati and Columbus questions about college preparation) are "only fair" or "poor."

Attitudes about the capability of teachers and administrators and their readiness to respond to parent interests were quite favorable in Cincinnati and Columbus but apparently less so in Washington, D.C. For example, 94 per cent of Cincinnati and 91 per cent of Columbus respondents who are parents answered "yes" when asked if their child's teacher "cares that he learn." In contrast, when asked about the teacher's interest in their child, only 80 per cent of Washington parents said the teacher was "very" or "somewhat" interested while 11 per cent responded "hardly interested" and 9 per cent said "not sure."

It seems important to note that race was an important correlate of attitudes in all three cities. With very few exceptions (e.g. approval of Head Start programs), black respondents tended to be more critical of the school systems than white persons. Also with few exceptions, however, (All in Washington and regarding athletics, buildings, and the track system for those who were familiar with it), black respondents who expressed negative attitudes constituted a minority within the black sub-sample.

It is interesting to contemplate the findings summarized above in light of current recommendations to restructure urban school systems by

shifting policy-making responsibilities from city wide to neighborhood levels. The data for these cities provided little evidence of widespread public dissatisfaction and/or strong grassroots demand for such changes. The typical citizen appeared to be uninformed but generally satisfied with the local schools. It would appear therefore that the wish to restructure school systems to provide greater community control is presently shared by a minority of activists, consultants, and journalists. On the other hand, the data do not deny the possibility that such restructuring might increase the presently low levels of public understanding about school affairs. Should this occur, the longstanding conviction of schoolmen that public understanding of school programs produces public support for them will be tested in some areas where today it can only be said that support exists apart from understanding.

Summary and Conclusion

To summarize briefly, the study of school-community relationships in the four surveys was guided by several objectives. These were to develop information about means of local school-community interaction and communication and their effectiveness, to become knowledgeable about local school-community issues, and to cultivate public receptivity to survey recommendations. A variety of methods including sample surveys, case study techniques, content analysis of school board minutes and other documents, interviews with local notables, and community meetings were employed. The reports demonstrate the value of collecting data from several sources and by several means in surveys of this type. A second characteristic of the various study designs which merits duplication

in other surveys is effort to examine the capacity of school personnel to hear and respond to public interests as well as to tell the public about programs. Finally, the study processes reflect an action-oriented posture on the part of the researchers which could be adapted usefully in other settings.

FOOTNOTES

1. Roald F. Campbell and John A. Ramseyer, The Dynamics of School-Community Relationships (New York: Allyn and Bacon, 1955).

2. Roald F. Campbell, et.al., Report of the Cincinnati School Survey (Cincinnati: Cincinnatians United For Good Schools, August, 1968); Luvern L. Cunningham, et.al., Report to the Columbus Board of Education (Columbus: The Advisory Commission on Problems Facing the Public Schools, 1968); Edward C. Cushman, et.al., Report of the Detroit High School Study Commission (Detroit: The Commission, June, 1968); and A Harry Passow, Toward Creating A Model Urban School System: A Study of the Washington, D.C. Public Schools (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1967).

3. For examples of such groups and discussion of their roles see, Luvern L. Cunningham and Raphael O. Nystrand, New Forms of Citizen Participation in School Affairs (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Coalition, 1969).

4. The procedure is described by Charles H. Backstrom and Gerald D. Hursh, Survey Research (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1963).

5. The Washington report also reports data from a professionally-done survey of local household residents in 1966.

6. In each instance, the local principal and PTA president, a neighborhood minister, and staff members of two city wide social and human relations agencies were asked to provide nominations. Efforts were made to interview all persons who received more than one nomination.

7. Initial interviewees "were selected as affiliated with groups known to be 'influential'. . . additional names were suggested by persons interviewed."

8. This questionnaire was designed by Professor Edwin Bridges of the University of Chicago. The questionnaire used in the Columbus household survey contained several of the items developed by Professor Bridges.

9. Hobson vs. Hansen, 269 F. Supp.. 401 (1967). Following the decision in this nationally-publicized case, superintendent of schools, Hansen, resigned his position to appeal rather than follow the directive of the court and the board of education to abolish the local track system.